

## Priscilla at Bergen Community College

### Northern New Jersey Health Professions Consortium

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Priscilla always doubted herself in everything she did. Growing up in a small town in Bergen County with a mother and grandmother who frequently fought with and insulted her, she thought she could accomplish “nothing or very little.” As she got older, Priscilla started to avoid being home and frequently got into trouble. “I felt like I didn't have family and decided to look elsewhere for it. Looking back now, I looked in the wrong places and hung out with the wrong people. I was not communicating with the family and believed all their lies: ‘You’re slow, you can't do it, or it’s not enough.’” As a result, Priscilla left school at 15, expecting to work at a “little store and find a guy” that could take care of her. She joined a Christian-based program that helps troubled teens. “I had no interest of following rules or learning about this God that I'd never in my life heard of.” Before this, Priscilla had never even stepped into a church.

After six months of disobeying rules and staff and trying to run away, Priscilla decided that she wanted more in life than a job that paid seven dollars an hour: she wanted to be happy like the others in her program. “All the staff were always happy, even when things went wrong. And personally, I feel if I had never found Christ, I would have been dead or hurt! I look back, and the reason why I wasn't [was] because he was there watching me [during] my troubled days.” Priscilla stayed in the program for a total of 17 months, getting the help she needed to graduate from high school and earn her diploma. During that time, however, her mother did not come to visit her, “so even while I was trying to change, she never supported me.”

Priscilla eventually returned home with her mother, and in 2010 she decided to go to Bergen Community College with the goal of obtaining a Physical Therapy degree. Unable to pass her math and biology classes, however, she became discouraged. Compounding this, her family continued to put her down and dissuade her from pursuing education instead of work. In an effort to be a “good daughter,” Priscilla took on three part-time jobs: one at the dental clinic at Bergen Community College, one at a hair salon, and one at a cleaning company, all while attending school full time.

This busy life took a toll, however: “I couldn't keep up, plus, in the midst of all this, I never had a car, so I had to bus everywhere! My goal was to save my money and buy my own car to get around, but all of my money was taken or forced from me.” While working at one of her part-time jobs, Priscilla broke her foot. Facing the difficult task of trying to get health insurance to have her foot treated, she lost all three of her part-time jobs. Hopeless and discouraged, and still dealing with unsupportive family members, she left home once more in 2012.

Priscilla left Bergen Community College and stayed at friends’ houses when she could. Although she didn’t plan on returning to the college, she remembered hearing about Bergen’s Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program funded by the Administration for Children and Families’ Office of Family Assistance and how it could help provide training and a job. Interested in the program’s Patient Care Technician training, Priscilla called the college and set up an

appointment with the HPOG staff. She applied and was accepted. Convincing herself that facing the challenge of difficult classes outweighed the challenge of dealing with no money, a broken foot, and living at friends' houses, Priscilla decided to "go for it and accomplish this."

Even with a broken foot, she attended class daily from September to January. "I was determined to finish and make the most of the opportunity I was given. It gave me the help I needed to refocus on my education and start a career helping people." After passing the state board exam and finding four or five job opportunities, Priscilla accepted a position at Christian Health Care Center – Ramapo Ridge Psychiatric Hospital as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA).

Her goal is now to save money and look for her own place. She is also considering returning to school to pursue her Registered Nurse or Physical Therapy degree. Priscilla is confident that she will be able to succeed in that goal and is grateful for the opportunity given her by HPOG: "Thank you again for all the founders and people who are involved in the health professions program, especially, Vincent Cheng, who mentioned and guided me. You don't know how appreciative I am and how you changed my life!"

**Stephanie at Bergen Community College  
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Stephanie Davila was referred to Warren County Community College (WCCC) by the County Division of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Stephanie's heritage is Hispanic. At the time she began the program, Stephanie was an unemployed, 22-year-old, single mother, with three children, the youngest being 2 years old. Stephanie and her family were receiving cash assistance from TANF as well as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Stephanie had some prior work experience as a house cleaner and personal caregiver, but her work record was interrupted because of family issues.

Stephanie enrolled in WCCC's Certified Nursing Assistant Program and worked diligently throughout the course. The HPOG program provided case management, books, mentoring, academic counseling, uniforms, and support. She completed the program and passed her State Certification. She is now gainfully employed at a long-term care facility very close to her home.

Stephanie reports that she is enjoying her new position and is excited about the prospects of improving her life. She feels that she is on the path to self-sufficiency.